Washington Stealthily Deserts Africa

AFRICOM Consolidation, Aid Dismantlement, and the Strategic Vacuum Being Filled by Russia and China

James O'Shea
Eagle Intelligence Reports

May 24, 2026

Published at Eagle Intelligence Reports:
https://eagleintelreports.com/washington-stealthily-deserts-africa/

ABSTRACT

There will be no Suez. No Saigon. America's retreat from Africa — a continent of 1.5 billion people and the minerals that power everything Washington claims to covet — is happening quietly. This paper examines the architecture and consequences of the United States' incremental withdrawal from Africa: the proposed consolidation of AFRICOM into a wider international command structure, the elimination of the entire $1.6 billion U.N. peacekeeping budget, the dismantlement of USAID, and unprecedented cuts in U.S. foreign aid amounting to the largest annual contraction in American development assistance in history. It traces the strategic vacuum being created across the Sahel — where jihadist violence killed over 9,000 people in 2025 alone and a corridor from Bamako to the Gulf of Guinea is consolidating — and analyses how Russia's Africa Corps and China's Belt and Road Initiative are filling it. The paper examines Russia's proposed 25-year naval base deal at Port Sudan and its implications for the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, and China's push for an Atlantic naval facility at Bata, Equatorial Guinea. It assesses the Washington Accords on Congo and Rwanda as a case study in the gap between diplomatic gesture and strategic commitment, and concludes that America's retreat is being driven not by a coherent strategic reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific but by reflexive institutional shrinkage — a choice made by inattention, with consequences that will take decades to reverse.

Keywords: AFRICOM, U.S. Africa policy, strategic retreat, Sahel, JNIM, Islamic State Sahel Province, Russia Africa Corps, Wagner Group, China Belt and Road, Port Sudan, Bab el-Mandeb, USAID, Washington Accords, DRC, Rwanda, great-power competition, soft power

Introduction

There will be no Suez. No Saigon. No single humiliating frame for historians to seize upon. America's retreat from Africa — a continent of 1.5 billion people and the minerals that power everything Washington claims to covet — is happening quietly. Troops are drawn down, aid is slashed, and diplomats are recalled to no fanfare. The official rationale is the pivot to the Indo-Pacific. The actual driver looks more like reflexive shrinkage. And when the bill comes due, the total could be larger than anyone in Washington realizes.

The clearest evidence of the retreat is buried in a Pentagon org chart reported by U.S. media in December. The diagram is a plan to fold U.S. Central Command, European Command, and Africa Command into a single unit called the 'International Command.' Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has reportedly asked planners to reduce the Pentagon's global command structure from 11 to 8. NORTHCOM, the homeland defense command, and SOUTHCOM, which covers 31 countries and 14 territories in Central and South America plus the Caribbean, are to be merged into a new 'Americas Command' (AMERICOM). The move reflects the administration's goal to dominate the Western Hemisphere.

Under the proposed reorganization, AFRICOM — created by President George W. Bush in 2007 to sharpen the Pentagon's focus on a region considered an incubator for terrorism — would be downgraded. Africa would be tucked into a command in which it must compete for resources and attention in a far larger portfolio.

> ***Under the proposed reorganization, AFRICOM would be downgraded. Africa would be tucked into a command in which it must compete for resources and attention in a far larger portfolio.***

Pentagon's Message Matters More than Numbers

Although a senior AFRICOM official reported in January that no official decision has yet been made, the consolidation would reportedly save roughly $330 million over five years. But that is a rounding error in the fiscal 2027 defense budget, which is estimated at $1.5 trillion. In any case, the message sent to African capitals matters much more than the numbers. The fiscal shuffle clearly suggests the United States is moving its Africa assets elsewhere and may not be coming back.

The consequences of the reorganization were already visible before the latest plans leaked. In June 2024, Gen. Michael Langley, AFRICOM's commander, warned that areas

such as the Sahel have become 'less safe' since the United States left Niger that year. The withdrawal closed a drone base at Agadez, effectively ending the most important intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance hub the United States had in West Africa. The Pentagon has not replaced that capability.

A senior official at AFRICOM said that command 'has always operated on a shoestring,' and it appears the shoestring is fraying. The administration's fiscal 2026 budget proposes eliminating the entire $1.6 billion budget for U.N. peacekeeping operations. That cuts funding that helped underwrite active missions in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Add in the dismemberment of USAID, the Trump administration's attempted elimination of the U.S. African Development Foundation, and unprecedented cuts in U.S. foreign aid, and what emerges is the largest annual contraction in American development assistance in history. The architecture of influence is coming down, piece by piece, in plain view.

> ***What emerges is the largest annual contraction in American development assistance in history. The architecture of influence is coming down, piece by piece, in plain view.***

Violence and Hostages at Core of Jihadist Corridor

Congressional aides and think tank panels question whether AFRICOM will survive in something close to its current form. But there are more pertinent questions: Will American decisions create a vacuum in Africa, shrinking its presence precisely when the continent is evolving into a central arena of global competition? Will the forces moving into the space vacated by the United States leave room for America to return?

The Sahel demonstrates the most immediate impact. An arid belt of sandy terrain, the Sahel stretches across north-central Africa more than 3,600 miles from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. The Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect documented 9,362 deaths from 3,737 security incidents across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in 2025 alone. Militants killed Mali's defense minister during an attack in April 2026. The al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM, a Salafi jihadist alliance, imposed a fuel blockade on Bamako and later executed truck drivers to enforce it. The militants also forced the Malian government into hostage negotiations over the fate of numerous foreign nationals. In an earlier seizure, the militants grabbed and held hostage a member of the UAE royal family.

The Islamic State Sahel Province, another jihadist affiliate active in Burkina Faso, launched an attack on the international airport in Niger's capital in January 2026. JNIM has expanded operations into Benin, Togo, and northern Ghana, creating what analysts describe as a jihadist corridor pushing toward the Gulf of Guinea. Burkina Faso, which the Global Terrorism Index once ranked the most terror-affected country on earth in 2023 and 2024, dissolved its political parties in January 2026.

Russia and China Capitalize on the West's Retreat

The Western response to this catastrophe has been to flee. Military juntas and transitional governments expelled France from Mali, then Burkina Faso, then Niger, then Chad. The U.N. peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, was forced out, too. The United States withdrew from Niger. What remains is a weak counterterrorism posture that, in practice, means coordinated drone strikes from places where America has worn out its welcome. Even its partnerships with coastal states are themselves beginning to slide. NGOs report that Benin, despite deploying 3,000 soldiers along its border with Burkina Faso and Niger, saw a 70 percent increase in deaths from JNIM attacks in 2025 compared with the previous year.

Russia has read this situation opportunistically. Vladimir Putin's military rebranded the Wagner Group as the Africa Corps after Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a plane crash two months after he led a failed mutiny. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Central African Republic now rely on the paramilitary group as an alternative to absent Western forces. A Georgetown University report says the Russian mercenaries stabilize nothing. Refugees from Mali tell aid workers in Mauritania that Africa Corps personnel have engaged in indiscriminate killings, abductions, sexual violence, and torture. The April 2026 offensives that overran the Malian base at Tessalit forced Russian troops to retreat alongside Malian forces. Moscow tells African juntas that it can deliver weapons, propaganda, political cover, and a willingness to do business with regimes the United States and Europe no longer trust.

> ***The chaotic result is that Russia may be able to convert African instability into leverage, access, and long-term positioning.***

The clearest illustration is Port Sudan. Khartoum's military has offered Moscow a 25-year deal to station up to 300 troops and four warships, including nuclear-powered vessels, at its Red Sea base. In return, the Sudanese would get air defense systems and other weapons that its besieged army cannot obtain elsewhere. The deal would also give Russia

preferential access to gold mining concessions in Africa's third-largest producer. Since Russia's access to Tartus is in jeopardy following the fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, the Sudanese deal would give Moscow its only major naval base outside the post-Soviet space.

The Russia-Sudan deal is not a sure thing, and the Sudanese government has temporarily frozen the establishment of the Russian base. But Moscow is clearly pushing for a presence relatively near a potential strategic chokepoint: Bab el-Mandeb, an 18-mile-wide strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. In normal times, about 12 to 14 percent of seaborne trade passes through the strait. A Russian facility on the Red Sea, equipped with electronic warfare systems and anti-ship missiles, would create a potential capacity to block shipping traffic through the strait.

As usual, China is playing a longer, quieter game, but the strategic logic remains the same. The People's Liberation Army has held a base in Djibouti since 2017, a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, America's only major permanent base in Africa. Pentagon assessments since 2021 have identified Equatorial Guinea — and specifically the Chinese-built deep-water port at Bata — as a leading candidate for China's second military facility. If built, it would be the first ever on the Atlantic. Although some analysts cast doubt on China's intentions, a Bata base would give the country a huge strategic advantage: the port can accommodate Chinese aircraft carriers.

The PLA has also sounded out Gabon, Mauritania, Namibia, and Angola. The Chinese strategy is not to seize ground but to accumulate dependencies — through ports, infrastructure loans, mining concessions, and surveillance contracts — until the strategic facts on the continent simply favor Beijing. Fifty-two of 54 African nations have signed memoranda of understanding with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. China is now the largest single creditor on the continent. It is also the dominant external player in the supply chains for cobalt, lithium, and rare earths, which are essential to any modern high-tech military industrial base.

Adversaries Anxious to Fill U.S. Gaps

Russian audacity or Chinese patience don't bind the threads. America's absence does. African governments don't usually pivot to Moscow or Beijing by preference. They make such choices because of a shrinking set of alternatives. When American officials dismantle soft-power programs such as USAID, China's Belt and Road infrastructure financing steps in to fill the gap. When peacekeeping budgets are eliminated, junta governments can turn to Africa Corps. If AFRICOM is folded into a generalist headquarters and the Niger air base disappears, the security partnerships that survived a decade of Sahel turmoil will

dissolve. Each individual cut can be defended as efficient. Taken together, they are a systematic dismantling of the tools the United States has used to develop rational policies on the continent for decades.

> ***African governments don't usually pivot to Moscow or Beijing by preference. They make such choices because of a shrinking set of alternatives.***

The administration's likely response to the planned Africa retreat is the Washington Accords. Last June, Secretary of State Marco Rubio presided as the foreign ministers of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda signed a peace agreement aimed at ending one of the deadliest conflicts of the post-Cold War era. The deal promised Rwandan troop withdrawal from eastern Congo, the dismantling of the Hutu militias linked to the 1994 genocide, and a regional economic framework binding both countries to the deal. The minerals provision revealed the likely American interest involved: cobalt, coltan, and tantalum, the supply chain that runs through every electric vehicle and guided munition Washington intends to build.

Eleven months later, though, the agreement is faltering. M23, the Rwandan-backed force that controls the mineral-rich territory in dispute, was never a party. Rwandan troops have not withdrawn. The Hutu militias have not been disbanded. In March, the treasury department sanctioned the Rwandan military and four of its commanders for violating the deal. Human Rights Watch summarized the result with characteristic restraint: paper promises, continued fighting, civilians bearing the cost. The Washington Accords represent the essential expression of the U.S. retreat from Africa: diplomacy as gesture, enforcement as afterthought, minerals as the most important word for Washington.

The Costs of Inattention

The standard rejoinder to criticisms of retreat from Africa is that the cutbacks will free up resources for the real strategic theater, the Indo-Pacific. That argument would be more persuasive if there were any evidence that the resources are being redirected. No such evidence exists. The savings from the AFRICOM and EUCOM consolidations look impressive. In the big picture, they are relatively trivial. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy explicitly elevates the Western Hemisphere — border enforcement, Venezuela, the cartels — over Africa or Europe. The 'pivot to Asia' that Washington has been talking about since the Obama administration has, in practice, become a pivot to the home hemisphere. Africa is being diminished not because some

other priority demands it, but because no one in this administration seems to consider it a priority.

A scenario increasingly difficult to dismiss is one in which China holds a naval base on the Atlantic, and both Russia and China hold bases on the Red Sea. Salafi jihadists consolidate control over an arc from Bamako to the Gulf of Guinea, and the half-dozen African capitals that still maintain genuine security partnerships with the United States walk away because they decide allegiances with the United States are not worth the political cost. By the time Washington decides that Africa matters again, the architecture for resolidifying ties will have been dismantled.

You can pull out troops in months. You cannot rebuild fifty years of institutional relationships, language capacity, intelligence networks, and embassy presence overnight. The retreat is fast. The return, if it ever comes, will be slow, expensive, and conducted on terms set by someone else. Washington is quietly making a choice, by inattention if not by design. Moscow and Beijing have taken notice.

> ***You can pull out troops in months. You cannot rebuild fifty years of institutional relationships overnight. The retreat is fast. The return, if it ever comes, will be slow, expensive, and conducted on terms set by someone else.***

About the Author

James O'Shea

James O'Shea is an award-winning American journalist and author. He is the past editor-in-chief of *The Los Angeles Times*, former managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, and chairman of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks. He is the author of three books, including *The Deal from Hell*, a compelling narrative about the collapse of the American newspaper industry. He holds a master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. Author profile: eagleintelreports.com/author/james-oshea/

Citation

O'Shea, James. "Washington Stealthily Deserts Africa." *Eagle Intelligence Reports*, May 24, 2026.

Original publication:

https://eagleintelreports.com/washington-stealthily-deserts-africa/

© 2026 Eagle Intelligence Reports. All rights reserved. Distributed for academic and policy research purposes only.

Reg. No.: J2025045739001 | VAT: RO52032420 | Bucharest, Romania